

James MacDonald Isn't Alone—The Truth About Pastoral Abuse

The number of prominent pastors stepping down because they are very controlling, manipulating, and creating a culture of fear and intimidation appears to have reached new heights these days. Although this type of behavior is unacceptable, I'm hoping to shed some light so that repentance can take place in the pulpit as well as the pew.

Regardless of the pastor, the comments are often the same: "The leadership is secretive, controlling and manipulating. They retaliate against anyone opposed to them! There is a culture of fear among the staff. The pastor has a lot of 'yes' men surrounding him." All these comments demand that pastors and elders look in the mirror, reassess our calling, and repent if warranted. That's obvious. But on the flip side; these statements are sometimes unwarranted and unfounded when used by disgruntled members.

The problem: Pastors are people: Why do they fall? They fall for the same reason that all Christians fall. Each of us is drawn away by our own evil desires and enticed. We need to abort sin when it's conceived (see James 1:14–15). Sin has a life cycle—it either grows or withers depending on whether we feed or starve it. John Owen once said, "Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you." Put Christ on the pedestal, not people. People will always let you down; Christ will not.

If a leader continues to ignore the warning signs of a hard heart, they will inevitably drift from God. Not all fallen pastors are wolves, false teachers or unbelievers; they've been overcome by sin. They need to be lovingly confronted and lovingly encouraged. Have we drifted so far that we have

forgotten to exhibit the same grace we so desperately need ourselves? I'm not talking about sweeping corruption under the rug; I'm speaking of the ultimate goal of restoration—not necessarily to ministry but to relationship. It's just as heartbreaking to see Christians bash a fallen leader as it is to watch the leader fall. Hurt people hurt people.

A misunderstood calling: Leaders may appear controlling because they are called to lead. They may come across as unapproachable because they set boundaries. They may be viewed as hard because they are called to defend. They may appear secretive because they must choose their words carefully. If they are not available 24/7, we say that they are “not there for us.” If they can't make every event or respond to every email, Tweet and Facebook post, we label them as “unavailable.” Folks, we all need a lot more grace.

When it comes to money, churches need to handle finances like we handle explosives: very carefully. However, everyone will have different opinions on where the money should be spent; this cannot be avoided. When churches grow quickly, this becomes even more challenging. I've noticed that how money is spent will always be an issue. As long as the church is avoiding massive debt, building on integrity and accomplishing the Great Commission, they are hopefully heading in a good direction.

This doesn't excuse financial mismanagement, but we must look at the whole picture. For example, I often hear this about churches in America: “The pastor is surrounded by ‘yes’ men.” Should we be surrounded by “no” men? God forbid. A healthy church is a unified church. This does not mean it's OK to control the board or manipulate decisions, but this topic deserves a closer look. Many times when people make this statement, it's because they were denied a request. Instead of repenting of a wrong attitude, they use the “yes men” clause against the leadership. But sometimes their concern is very valid. So yes, some churches have passive board members who do

not confront overbearing pastors, and I'm not defending that behavior. However, the answer is not a passive pastor. Within the leadership of the church, there ought to be unity, which is only found in prayerful submission to one another.

Leaders walk a very fine line: Church leaders must be bold but also broken, firm but flexible, hard on sin but humble with others, demanding excellence but not pushy, motivating but not overbearing. Sadly, it's impossible to walk this line perfectly. We need to own our faults, apologize and ask God to change us. But on the flip side, a wounded pastor who is constantly under the microscope—where every word and action is weighed in the balance—can become passive to avoid pain. We begin to think, “I don't want to deal with that issue; I've been hurt many times before,” and we become paralyzed.

The passive pastor gets steamrolled, and the abusive pastor is the steamroller. Pastors will spend their lives trying to find the middle ground. Those who are abusive, manipulating and controlling (the wrong type of control, that is) need to repent, seek restoration and rebuild broken relationships. Passive, weak, people-pleasing pastors also need to repent and spend time in the prayer closet. Ask God for boldness to lead, fortitude to make tough decisions and the strength to continue. Bold, humble, gracious leaders are desperately needed in these dire times. The church, as well as our nation, desperately needs to hear “the voice crying in the wilderness” to awaken, convict and restore.

It's hard to walk the fine line between passivity and passion; balance and boldness. As they say, “The struggle is real.” As a child, I would isolate myself to prevent future pain (I still tend to do that today). I became an approval seeker, something you would find hard to believe if you heard my preaching. Angry people scare me, and personal criticism hurts more deeply than it should. The deep pains of ministry can linger, and the enemy of our soul will use them against us. Thankfully, God makes provision for all our needs through His

Word. He must be our anchor and our true source of hope.

The solution: As I said in a past op-ed, if you are on the cliff or have already fallen, take time now and repent. It will hurt, but the fruit of repentance far outweighs the fruit of exposure that will surely come (see Num. 32:23). God's grace will see you through. A penitent person turns from sin. They accept full responsibility for their actions without blame, resentment or bitterness. They seek forgiveness without conditions and stipulations. They take full (not partial) responsibility for their actions. There can be no "buts" when repentance is genuine. "I am sorry. I was wrong. Please forgive me," are often (although not always) healing words and signs of repentance. Excuses need to stop before healing can occur.

Begin to repair cracks in the armor by making God, not ministry, the priority. Deep healing needs to take place. Weep and worship while He heals and restores. Let the Bible study you; let it cut deep and remove the cancer of pride. When you read books written by others, stop glossing over Scripture because you "already know what the Bible says." Pride is deadly and damning. Ask God to heal and help. You may call yourself "Spirit-filled," but are you? That's the key: to be broken and humble before God, exposing sin as soon as it begins, staying vigilant and remembering that your enemy goes about as a lion seeking to destroy you. Every year, I try to read Paul Tripp's book on pastoral ministry, *Dangerous Calling*, and I encourage you to do the same.

As a final word: Don't forget about taking care of your body. Most pastors are either skinny and malnourished, living on energy drinks, or are overweight, tired and unproductive. Both states will affect your mood and your attitude toward others. What you put in your body and mind affects your spirit—and when you feed the spirit, it affects the body and the soul. I'm often asked to pray for people who have panic attacks, angry outbursts and anxiety. God honors prayer, but are we

opening the door by not halting highly addictive habits that cause those very things?

In the past, I excused my poor attitude with statements such as “I had a bad day,” “I’m under a lot of stress” or “I’m tired.” Ironically, I was the primary cause of my bad days, stress and fatigue. Addiction to caffeine, for example, often fuels angry temper tantrums and explosive outbursts. It’s a powerful stimulant that incites irritability and a quick temper. Even the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders lists caffeine-related disorders—all can lead to angry outbursts, severe anxiety and extreme irritability. Wake up ... you may be fueling the very thing you’re fighting. This is not what many want to hear, but it’s what they need to hear. (Here is a teaching on health for those interested, and free e-books are available here.)

Remember, there are consequences for past mistakes, but it’s best to live within God’s healing arms of forgiveness rather than live broken outside of His will. Which way will you turn ... which way will you run? {eo}

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